

# Exploring Knowledge: Safeguarding and Sharing Intangible Cultural Heritage

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## Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the Intangible Cultural Heritage program developed by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. It traces the early development of the program, and then provides an overview of two recent projects that explore, document, and encourage the continued safeguarding and sharing of ICH knowledge and skills: the Living Heritage Economy Case Study project, and the Oral History Roadshow.

## Background

Newfoundland and Labrador is the easternmost province of Canada. Situated in the country's Atlantic region, it incorporates the island of Newfoundland and mainland Labrador to the northwest. It has a combined area of 405,212 square kilometres, with a population of just over 514,000. Most of the population is concentrated on the eastern portion of the island of Newfoundland.

It is a province with a rich cultural heritage, with both native indigenous populations, and a colonist population of predominantly English and Irish ancestry. The island of Newfoundland has a long history associated with the North Atlantic cod fishery, and much of its local culture and

flavour evolved in small fishing villages scattered along the island's long coastline. Linguistic, cultural, and social traditions persisted in many small isolated communities after they had faded or changed in the European communities where they were born.

By 1992, once-plentiful codfish stocks had dwindled to near extinction. Fearing they would disappear entirely if the fisheries remained open, the federal government of the day instituted a moratorium on northern cod stocks. The moratorium abruptly ended a way of life that had endured for generations in many rural communities, leading to a decline of rural settlements throughout Newfoundland and Labrador.

In the small fishing community of Keels, as one example, the population dropped from around 200 people in 1982 to close to 50 by 2012. An observer in that community notes that "residents have gradually moved away to seek work in places like Alberta, and the landscape of Keels has dramatically changed. Many buildings have been abandoned, some torn down, and a number of houses have been bought up by summer residents from Ontario or the United States" -- a post-moratorium story repeated over and over throughout much of the province (Pocius 2).

Out-migration and unemployment impacted not only the physical landscape, but also the intangible cultural heritage tied to the fishery, and the pattern of life in small rural communities. The resulting movement of young people to urban areas or out of the province meant that cultural traditions were not being transmitted from generation to generation in the same way, or to the extent to which they had once been passed down.

Recognizing the potential negative impacts to local intangible culture, the province acted. In 2006, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador released its Provincial Cultural Strategy, *Creative Newfoundland and Labrador*. It outlined the need for a strategy to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), and recommended to "over the longer term, create a public advisory committee with responsibility for the recognition and designation of provincial intangible cultural heritage" (Creative 35).

In 2008, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) established its ICH office in the city of St. John's, and began work to safeguard local traditions. In 2012, HFNL was accredited as a non-governmental organization in the field of intangible cultural heritage at the fourth session of the General Assembly of the States Parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The main purpose of the office is to further the work of the provincial ICH strategy, namely, to safeguard and sustain the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs. This is achieved through initiatives that celebrate, record, disseminate, and promote our living heritage and help to build bridges between diverse cultural groups within and outside Newfoundland and Labrador.

## Implementation of the ICH Strategy

The Newfoundland and Labrador ICH strategy has four goals: documentation, the work of inventorying; celebration, where we honour our tradition-bearers; transmission, where we ensure that skills are passed from person to person, generation to generation, and community to community; and, cultural industry, where we build stronger communities using intangible cultural heritage as a tool (see Heritage 2008).

Community-based projects are at the heart of HFNL's safeguarding work. Essentially, a topic or community is identified, background research is conducted, and then fieldwork is undertaken to document living knowledge. Then, some sort of event or project is organized, utilizing the information collected, which allows for public participation in and/or celebration of the tradition under study. Everything is documented, and then added to a topic collection on the ICH Inventory. In addition, HFNL continues to develop programs for training of ethnographic field workers, project leaders and planners, and to develop ways of providing practical technical support and advice to local heritage and community organizations engaged in ICH initiatives.

Since 2008, HFNL has organized a wide range of workshops, festivals, demonstrations, conferences, and community-based research projects. This paper will focus on two broad projects of HFNL: the Living Heritage Economy case study project; and the Oral History Roadshow project.

## Living Heritage Economy Case Studies

In October 2017, the ICH office hosted a 2-day Forum on Adapting NL's Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in St. John's. This included a "strategy cafe" which allowed participants to converse with fellow heritage professionals and enthusiasts about the future of intangible cultural heritage, to establish the needs and desires of local organizations, and brainstorm how best to achieve these goals. At the end of the session, participants were asked to dream about the future of the province's intangible cultural heritage strategy (see Harvey & Jarvis).

Out of this came a number of recommendations, including one to develop further processes for incubating traditional skill sets in communities, and to assist in removing barriers to enterprise development. Following the Forum, the ICH Committee met and decided to move forward with a series of "Living Heritage Economy Case Studies" which would look at building cultural businesses based on aspects of our intangible cultural heritage.

Newfoundland and Labrador has long been building cultural businesses based on aspects of our intangible heritage. Traditional crafts such as hooked mats, tea dolls, carvings, knitted goods, and boots and slippers made from animal skins are on display in heritage and craft shops all over the province. Traditional music is the backbone of the province's music industry. Heritage theatre presentations and "Times" interpreting our history and incorporating traditional forms of music and dance abound. The most successful of these enterprises have involved the whole community.

Started in 2018, the "Living Heritage Economy" series is an ongoing series of pdf-format case studies examining the links between intangible cultural heritage, traditionality, entrepreneurship, and community economic development. The publication of these ICH-based business case studies is meant to demonstrate the link between ICH and sustainable community development, and to inspire tradition bearers to explore business opportunities related to ICH.

The first case study focuses on the work of textile artist Janet Peter, and how she incorporates traditional figures from local calendar customs and folk beliefs into her designs.

She formalized that love of creativity in the 1990s when she went to the College of the North Atlantic in Stephenville and earned a diploma in visual arts. After graduating, she moved back to St. John's. As she thought about how best to apply her training, a friend suggested that she make mummers, the disguised house-visitors of local Christmas customs. At that point, there were only a few people making mummers for the craft market, a situation which has changed drastically since the late '90s. Janet is not afraid to delve into the darker aspects of Newfoundland and Labrador folklore and legend. It is her exploration of folk motifs and supernatural belief that makes her work stand out in the local craft scene. Janet explains,

The thing that got the mummers started were stories from people who had experienced the tradition as children. Their perspective of having these hooded masked people coming into the house -- who were loud, drinking, falling over, causing chaos -- was terrifying for many of them. That was my inspiration. It wasn't "We had a grand kitchen party, and everybody danced, and they went home," it was the terror aspect. That has been the seam running through most of the work I create. I always had an interest in the paranormal and the creepy, and darker things: things like fairies and fairy lore, being dark, luring people away, the idea of the changeling. Obviously there is an appeal there for that whole idea of trying to kick away the darkness that creeps into our lives. It is something that has always interested me; I think it has always been there. Even when I was a kid, people were into that sort of thing. It allows me to tap into a generation before, because it is a consistent thing that doesn't seem to be going away (*qtd in* LHECS001 3).

The second case studies features the work of another textile artist, a heritage knitter Christine LeGrow. A life-long knitter, her company Spindrift Handknits produces over 30 regular hand-knit

wool products across a diverse product line. The business is supported by rural knitters throughout the island who make extensive use of traditional patterns that have been handed down through generations. LeGrow sees knitting as a very important part of Newfoundland history, and the survival of early settlers on the island:

I think hand knits, particularly out of sheep wool, is very important for protecting the story of our survival in a really cold, damp climate, and how important those one or two sheep that somebody owned back in the 1800s were to keeping hands and feet and bodies warm. That was getting lost, people were forgetting about the actual roots of knitted goods, and how important it was our survival in this cold, rocky place. In Newfoundland a couple hundred years ago, I don't think the population would have survived here without wool from sheep to keep their bodies protected from the cold (*qtd in LHECS002 4*).

Since 2015, LeGrow has expanded her business to include her take on traditional knitting patterns. Her best seller is the “Some Warm Mittens” package, a series of four mitten patterns developed in collaboration between Spindrift and “Shirl the Purl” -- Shirley Scott, author of *Canada Knits: Craft and Comfort in a Northern Land*.

Christine and Shirley's most recent collaboration is their 2018 book, *Saltwater Mittens from the Island of Newfoundland: More than 20 Heritage Designs to Knit* published by Boulder Publications, an independent Canadian book publishing company headquartered in Newfoundland and Labrador. Recognizing the value of traditional patterns, the duo have expertly and painstakingly recreated more than 20 heritage patterns for today's knitter. The patterns are rated by difficulty and varied in style, including trigger mitts, wristers, five-finger mittens (a.k.a. gloves), thumbless mitts for children, and classic mittens. The goal of their book is to encourage the transmission and celebration of this heritage art form. By making these traditional patterns accessible, they are encouraging the spread of skills, knowledge, and experimentation.

The final case study looks at the Tea Rose Eatery & Livyers' Lot Économusée. The Livyers' Lot Économusée was established to provide a venue for local craftspeople to demonstrate their skills and products, and to improve their options in terms of craft sales. The name comes from a set of Newfoundland words which classified fishermen as either “livyers”—those who lived in the places where they fished, and “stationers”—those who migrated with the fishery. Organizer Elizabeth Ann Murphy explains:

With the site that we have, we have such a full picture. You can go in the old house that is kept the way it was 80 years ago. It was moved in from Port Elizabeth, Flat Islands. It was brought from there to Red Harbour. Flat Islands people resettled as a collective and went to Red Island. They made a community there, they built the roads, structured the community, and they brought their houses in there. We had it moved from Red Harbour to the site. People can go upstairs, see the old patchwork quilts with the scattered hole in them on the beds, and then go in the craft shop and see more modern day patchwork

available for sale. They can see the old time, woolen stockings hung up over the stove, and then they can go in the Tea House and order salt fish with drawn butter. It's a full experience (*qtd in LHECS003 2*)

An ÉCONOMUSÉE® is an experiential tourism destination. It is an independent business that operates in the craft or agri-food sector which utilizes some form of authentic traditional know-how in the production of its products. Each member site opens its doors to the public to showcase what they do and, in many cases, offers a hands-on component for the visitor to try. Each one has an on-site boutique. The concept of the économusée was born in 1992 in Quebec, with a mandate to allow artisans and craft enterprises to develop and promote in situ traditionally-inspired crafts and knowledge, in order to offer the public a high-quality cultural and tourist product. The Placentia West Heritage Committee had been around in one form or another since 1983, while craft work and mat-making had been a regional development initiative dating back to the 1970s, and the site was accredited by the international économusée network until the 2000s. The case study provides a model for local craft networks and producers to work together to form a social enterprise.

The three case studies described here are completed and online as of August 2019, with two more in preparation. The first will focus on the use of traditional blacksmithing skills in developing a not-for-profit enterprise. The second will look at the incorporation of traditional folk beliefs around the supernatural creatures known as fairies or “little people” in cultural tourism products.

There is a cautionary note that must be added here. While ICH skills and knowledge have the potential to aid local sustainability or personal income, practitioners must learn to balance the intrinsic values of local ICH with the pressures that can accompany a quickly developing marketable product. ICH is, at its heart, community based, and control over local ICH must remain at the community level.

As researcher Janice Francis-Lindsay (165) notes, “...in order to develop heritage tourisms that reflect society's way of life, customs and traditions, local populations will have to be lead marketers, promoters and conveyors of the messages.” Over-commercialization of traditional craft can create more problems than benefits, with a demand for increased production resulting in a lowering of quality, or a loss of the traditional knowledge behind the craft. A more balanced approach might follow what author Erik Cohen (165) calls “rehabilitative commercialization” which may, in his words “also help to keep alive moribund crafts, or revive half-forgotten old techniques, or even whole crafts which have disappeared in the past. The growing demand for marketable craft products may even, in some instances, give an impetus for the training of additional producers, who have never before been involved in craft production for an internal audience.”

## Oral History Road Show

The Oral History Road Show was a project developed by HFNL around two ideas: encouraging community engagement in local heritage; and supporting the mental health of senior citizens.

The Oral History Roadshow was designed to document and archive traditional knowledge in communities across the province. The idea was to empower and encourage community members to showcase their memories through a series of public oral history night celebrations. The community members' knowledge and experiences were then shared through the production of a booklet for each set of community stories.

The main geographic focus of the project was on smaller, rural communities, many of which face shifting demographics and an aging population. Mr. Barry Manual, Mayor of the Town of Grand Falls-Windsor, explained the need for projects such as this by saying, "The story we have to tell is so unique in this community. We want to make sure that story is preserved and told. Heritage is something we all need to protect for a long time to come" (Grand Falls 1).

In the work that the HFNL has been doing to document NL's living heritage, we often hear the same concern expressed by locals -- that their stories are dying out in their communities. Inspired and led by this, the main objective of the Oral History Night Roadshow was to safeguard those stories in a creative and innovative way.

Simply put, the Oral History Roadshow saw HFNL staff travel from community to community, hosting a series of ten Oral History Nights, each with a different theme. These are open-mic storytelling sessions which are led and inspired by that community. We partnered with local museums, cultural organizations, and 50+ clubs to bring together community members, create partnerships, and plan each event.

Different communities had different priorities: Cartwright wanted to focus on crafts, Spaniard's Bay on folk cures, and Cape Broyle on jukeboxes. Each community told the stories that were important to them at their Oral History Night. People came out, enjoyed healthy food, mixed with a broad selection of locals, and shared their community histories and personal memories.

After the Oral History Night open-mic, we lingered around the community, meeting individually with community members, and doing one-on-one audio recordings of their stories. We then archived and shared those stories online in partnership with Memorial University's Digital Archives Initiative, and selected specific stories to transcribe.

In order to have a lasting impact in the towns we visited, we prepared a booklet for each stop on the Roadshow about what we learned from community members in that town. These booklets capitalized on the community members' experiences and knowledge, and celebrated their

contributions and role as tradition-bearers in the town. These booklets were then printed, given back to the community at a public booklet launch in each town, shared with local libraries, seniors, youth and recreation committees, and made available for free online.

Senior citizens were involved actively at every step of the project, with multiple opportunities for seniors to become involved in a variety of ways: through the organization and planning of local Oral History Nights; through the interview process within communities; through the editing of the local oral history booklets; and finally, through the planning and celebration of the final booklet launches.

This heritage project supported people as they shared their community history, encouraged social inclusion, and prompted community vitality, while at the same time promoting pride in local identity and traditional cultural knowledge.

The Oral History Roadshow completed 10 projects, including work in: New Perlican; Spaniard's Bay; Port Blandford; Salmon Cove; Bay Roberts; Bonne Bay; Cape Broyle; Cartwright (Labrador); St. John's; and Marysvalle. As we sought feedback on the Oral History Roadshow in each community we visited, we found that the project increased community vitality and pride. Event organizers stressed how beneficial the project was for the seniors of their community. Several people noted the importance of capturing and sharing communities' stories and history. A recurring theme was a call to continue to make sure seniors are involved in safeguarding their heritage.

The geographical span of the project, which included the entire province, and a limited budget also presented challenges. We worked with several communities across Newfoundland, as well as in Labrador. We had to budget for travel, meals, and accommodations. The last challenge we faced was a timeline of one year. In each community, we had to complete follow-up interviews with interested community members as quickly as possible following the public Oral History Night. Our goal was to process audio recordings and photos, make the material available online, transcribe sections of the interviews, and produce a booklet for each community.

We judge the project to be a success, and a model for future work. Several communities are on their second or third printing of the booklets and have given or sold the booklets to people far beyond their communities. As on local organizer, Calvin Efford from Port Blandford, noted, the project provided "an opportunity for older residents to provide information on a different way of life to future generations." This intergenerational learning was particularly meaningful for communities and a great way to ensure that Canada's history is learned and shared by future generations of Canadians. Because of its contribution to the understanding of local heritage, the Oral History Roadshow received an Honorable Mention for the Canadian Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Community Programming in 2018.



## Conclusion

From these examples, HFNL is attempting to demonstrate that ICH tool which can be used, carefully, for community and individual development. In the words of ethnomusicologist Dr. Kristin Harris Walsh (34), "tradition needs to breathe and grow in order for it to remain relevant in the years to come." Safeguarding measures to document and transmit skills can also provide social or economic opportunities to people in their everyday life. Working on ICH projects is a means of providing a link from our past, through the present, and into our future. It also fosters a sense of responsibility and, hopefully, action.

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